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Sheep Producers Bring "Taste" to Kentucky Derby

By Bill Holleran

On April 27, more than 200 lambs left the Owenton Stockyards bound for Wolverine Packing in Michigan, where they were processed for Churchill Downs to be served on Derby Day.

The lambs were part of a larger group of Kentucky lambs that chef Gil Logan wanted for his Derby Day menu this year. Ted Thompson, Brian Forsee, Leslie Minch, and the University of Kentucky consigned their lambs for \$1.35 per pound for the event with help from Kentucky Department of Agriculture officials who helped negotiate the deal with Churchill Downs, and Wolverine Packing.

Ted Thompson consigned 46 crossbred lambs that averaged 111 pounds. Thompson, a well-known producer who has raised sheep since the 1950s, said the market is the best it has ever been for sheep producers. "Sheep are more work than cattle, but when you lamb early and sell them at four months old, it's pretty quick money," said Thompson, who farms 130 acres in Pendleton County. Thompson also recalled selling lambs years ago at 40 cents per pound. Thompson crosses 100 Hampshire/Suffolk ewes with a Dorset ram.



Ted Thompson of Pendleton County unloads his sheep bound for Wolverine Packing.

Brian Forsee of Owenton consigned 118 lambs for the Derby. Forsee, who has a nationally renowned flock of Southdown sheep, said his granddaddy got started with Southdowns in 1927 for a 4-H project, and he still has some of the original genetics in his flock today. Forsee keeps half of his 300-ewe flock purebred that he sells through purebred sales across the country, and half of his flock is crossbred for market lamb production. "We have sold our market lambs through the KDA Sheep Tel-O-Auction for years, and this is another opportunity to help promote Kentucky's sheep industry," he said. Forsee believes educating the public about lamb

could spur consumption and keep the market strong. Forsee raised the reserve grand champion Southdown ram at the North American International Livestock Exposition in Louisville last November.

Kathy Meyer from Bourbon County crosses Texel rams with her crossbred ewes to produce high-quality market lambs for the locker, restaurant, and Tel-O-Auction markets. "The lamb industry is expanding since people are looking for alternative income sources to tobacco, and sheep make a perfect fit for many existing operations. By companion grazing sheep with cattle, a farmer could add 100 ewes to an already existing 100-

head cow herd," said Meyer. She added that with a \$6,800 investment a commercial producer could net an additional \$4,800 per year from their existing beef cattle operations.

Endre Fink of Double F club lambs in Winchester sells Hampshire lambs for show prospects all over the country. Fink believes sheep offer a unique opportunity for people with limited resources who live close to town.

Richard Van Sickle has been raising sheep for more than 25 years in Winchester and is now serving his third term as president of the Kentucky Sheep and Wool Producers Association. Although Van Sickle sells club lambs, he's also one of a few people who raise purebred Hampshire frame sheep that are bred for larger size and performance.

Ann Brown of Mt. Sterling raises Dorset, Cotswold, Karakul and English Leicester long wool breeds. The last three breeds were kept by George Washington at Mt. Vernon. Her 75-100 ewes are sheared in May and September. Most of the wool is used for spinning, and some goes to the "Wool Mill," a regional mill that Brown, along with several investors, established to help make wool textiles.

Animal ID Equals Opportunity

By Tim Dietrich

We have been hearing about a national animal identification program for a few years, and unless you have been living in a cave you know that December 23, 2003, had great significance in catapulting this effort. With the announcement of the case of BSE discovered in a Holstein cow in Washington state, this issue got put on a fast track.

Since the discovery of our first case of BSE, USDA has been working on implementation of a National Animal Identification System, and we were all waiting to find out what it would be. In the spring of 2004 we found out this would be voluntary until there was a system in place that would work and USDA was confident it would satisfy the needs of 48-hour traceback. Realistically, the marketplace, rather than government, likely will drive implementation of an animal ID program.

As we all know, all exports of U.S. beef ceased that day in late December 2003, and regaining them has been no easy task. We since have regained access to some of our export markets but to this point still not our largest customer, Japan. I firmly believe we are getting closer to getting that market back through negotiations among gov-

ernment officials on both sides, but I can safely say it won't be without added effort from our producers here in the U.S. Even when we do start shipping product to Japan again, it will take some time, to say the least, to regain the volume we were exporting there prior to losing that market. Other countries have captured the void that was left behind when Japan closed its borders to U.S. beef. Of course, there is no other country other than Canada that can provide the same quality of product that we can, so we do have that in our favor. Still, I think it will take some time to get back to the levels we all want.

Marcine Moldenhauer, a supply chain manager for Excel in Wichita, Kan., said beef producers who want a share of the Asian market when it opens must be able to prove where their animals have been throughout their entire lives. "I tell producers, 'You need to be doing everything you can with this year's calf crop,'" Moldenhauer said at a Beef Academy program at the Nebraska Cattlemen's Classic in Kearney.

The more our producers do to satisfy traceability and to verify age, the sooner we will regain the confidence of our Asian customers, not to mention what that will do to solidify the U.S. consumers' confidence in our industry.

Kentucky is now set up to assign "premise" IDs through the state veterinarian's office, which is the first step to having a traceable system. I strongly encourage all Kentucky producers to embrace this issue, get your premise IDs in order and keep calving records on this current calf crop. Then, look for opportunities to take advantage of your efforts, be proud of your product and market it to realize its full value. I believe in the coming months we will see many opportunities to access markets that need source- and age-verified cattle. We should all be prepared to provide any necessary documentation that will allow us to enter such markets in order to maximize the value of our cattle. We have had a few CPH-45 sales in which the cattle were age- and source-verified, and I would say there is a good chance they will all be that way in the future. We should be "Kentucky Proud" of our cattle industry and show the world we are top-quality producers raising a top-quality product.

We Kentucky producers should meet this challenge head-on as an industry, overcome the challenges and embrace the opportunities.

Division of Show and Fair Promotion Kicks Off Show Season

By Jeff Zinner

The Division of Show and Fair Promotion has kicked off the 2005 show season with a bang! This year's youth preview beef shows concluded with a record number of entries. In addition to the preview beef shows, we have also had some highly competitive terminal hog shows.

Looking at the months ahead, we will be conducting district lamb, goat, dairy, and beef livestock shows along with some swine preview shows. All market goats, lambs, and hogs will need to be DNA tested by May 28 to be eligible to show at our shows. All youth showing market animals must go to a DNA tag-in site to get their animal

tagged and DNA tested. Contact your local 4-H agent, FFA advisor, or the Division of Show and Fair Promotion to find out information about the tag-in sites and shows closest to you.

Later this summer, the Division of Show and Fair Promotion will host three Kentucky Junior Livestock Expos. These livestock expos are exciting two-day events that consist of Livestock Judging Clinics, Livestock Judging Contests, Skill-A-Thons, and On-Foot Livestock shows. The popularity and participation in these events has increased exponentially over the past couple of years. Last year we had more than 1,700 livestock entries at the three expos, shattering our previous record of 1,500. These expos are fun, family-

oriented, educational events that anyone interested in the livestock industry should attend. The Kentucky Junior Livestock Expos are unique events because they give exhibitors and spectators the chance to see and evaluate several types of livestock all at one place. We encourage all youth livestock exhibitors to attend at least one of these expos each year because it is a valuable tool in learning about Kentucky's various livestock industries.

For additional information on any of these events please contact the Division of Show and Fair Promotion at (502) 564-4983 or e-mail Jeff Zinner at jeff.zinner@ky.gov

DPAK Accepting Dairy Producer Award Nominations

By Eunice Schlappi

The Dairy Products Association of Kentucky (DPAK) has announced that it is accepting nominations for the fourth annual Kentucky Quality Dairy Producer Award.

The purpose of the Kentucky Quality Dairy Producer Award is to recognize the dairy producer or farm family that exemplifies quality milk production in Kentucky. The competition is open to all Kentucky dairy producers. The award considers somatic cell count, average P.I. (if applicable), standard plate count, and other criteria. Applications may be submitted by producers themselves or by professionals who serve the dairy industry as dairy field representatives, veterinarians, dairy extension personnel, milk haulers, inspectors, and others. These individuals should work with the dairy producer to complete the application.

Previous winners were Tommy and Linda Marcum of Grayson, who won in 2002 and 2004, and the Hord family from Tollesboro in 2003.

DPAK represents the dairy processing and manufacturing plants in Kentucky.

Its membership also includes industry, technical, and academic representatives. The application and criteria are reviewed by a committee to determine the finalists for the competition.

The award also is sponsored by the Kentucky Department of Agriculture, the University of Kentucky and the Kentucky Milk Producers Association.

Applications are available through the University of Kentucky Division of Regulatory Services Web site at www.rs.uky.edu. Click Milk/General Information/Dairy Quality Producer Award.

Applications will be based on criteria between April 1, 2004, and March 31, 2005. All nominees must have a valid permit from the Milk Safety Branch for that time period. All applications are to be postmarked or delivered to DPAK no later than June 15. Applications are to be sent to DPAK-David Klee, 514 General John Payne Blvd., Georgetown, KY 40324.

For more information, contact Eunice Schlappi, dairy marketing specialist for the Kentucky Department of Agriculture, by phone at (502) 564-4983, ext. 222, or by e-mail at Eunice.schlappi@ky.gov.

Independent Poultry Processor Up and Running

Tim Mracek and family have carefully invested in a new facility just north of Bowling Green that offers farmers opportunities in the value-added poultry industry. The new USDA-inspected harvesting and processing unit enables independent poultry producers to sell their birds to the public. A growing number of consumers prefer free-range, antibiotic-free, and organically produced chicken. This niche market was nearly out of reach until Mracek developed a USDA-inspected facility.

Presently, the Mraceks' unit is processing two to three days a week with a capacity of 300 birds per day. It will process chickens, quail, Guinea, squab, duck, goose, pheasant, chuckar and turkeys. Mracek doesn't plan to process emu or ostrich at this time. This new facility is impressively designed to maintain safety and quality. Tim also invested in a vacuum packaging unit to enhance shelf

life.

Poultry production has some advantages. First, it's a 6- to 8-week cycle from chick to a finished six-pound bird. The initial fixed cost is minimal, with variable cost of \$1 per chick and \$2-2.25 feed per bird. Demand appears to be significant, while volume has been lacking due to a lack of USDA-inspected processors.

In agriculture it's always important to secure a market before initiating production. Your market may be at the farmers' market or a white-tablecloth restaurant expecting a consistent quality product. Independent poultry production is an interesting alternative in the effort to diversify farm production, and it's now possible with the Mraceks' new poultry processing facility. For more information call the Kentucky Department of Agriculture at (502) 564-4983 or Tim Mracek at (270) 777-3214.

—Warren Beeler

Market Reports Available

Whether you're buying and selling produce, vegetable or bedding plants or trying to determine how to price your own products, checking market reports can assist you with your management decisions.

Last year the University of Kentucky began reporting market prices at various farmers' markets and produce auctions across Kentucky. Many people have yet to discover the enjoyment of buying plants and produce at the many farmers' markets and produce auction markets across the Commonwealth.

UK's New Crop Opportunities Center, maintained by Christy Cassady, offers farmers' market reports for three regions of the state and reports for three produce auctions, including Bath County, Fairview and Lincoln County.

Check the new crop opportunities Web site at <http://www.uky.edu/Ag/NewCrops/> or contact your county extension agent for more information.

The Kentucky Department of Agriculture also disseminates market information through its weekly Livestock and Grain Market News Branch. If you would like to find daily livestock or grain market prices, go to www.kyagr.com and click on "check market prices" in the drop down menu on our home page. To receive a hard copy of the report, contact Mike Cocanougher at (502) 564-4983.

Tobacco Plant Hotline

It appears by the amount of ground being plowed in central Kentucky that there will be quite a bit of tobacco grown again this year, and since the quota system is no longer in place, and farmers can now grow as much tobacco as they want, there may be a shortage of plants this year.

If you have plants for sale you can call the Tobacco Plant Hotline and we will try to put you in touch with farmers needing plants. If you need tobacco plants, we will try to get you in touch with someone in your area who has them available. As of May 3, KDA staff have located 4 million plants.

The Tobacco Plant Hotline number is 1-888-567-9589. For a list of sellers, go to <http://www.kyagr.com/tobacco.htm>. Contact Jeff Zinner or Jake Schmitz for details.

Sheltowee Farm is Expanding Mushroom Production

Billy Webb, founder of Sheltowee Farm, is not your ordinary Kentucky farmer. Webb, who holds a master's degree in chemical engineering and is a retired naval officer, is passionate about growing gourmet mushrooms for the restaurant trade and has created his own market with high-end restaurant chefs from Louisville to Lexington.

Webb grows Shiitake and Oyster mushrooms on a 200-acre family farm in the Salt Lick area of Bath County. His Shiitakes grow on more than 18,000 logs that are crib stacked in wooded areas, and his assorted tropical oyster mushrooms grow in an environmentally controlled facility where temperature and humidity can be closely monitored. "Our mushrooms are certified organic, and we can't supply our demand," said Webb, who delivers 300 pounds of mushrooms per week to over 30 restaurants.

Webb received a \$37,000 grant from the Agricultural Development Board to construct a shipping and receiving area to help establish a distribution point for area farmers that would like to grow mushrooms for Sheltowee, and for free consulting about how to raise them. Webb has four farmers contracted to



Billy Webb shows some Shiitake mushrooms harvested from hardwood logs.

grow for him and is looking for six more in the area. The contract is for 1,000 logs of Shiitake production with the option to increase by 1,000 logs each year with full capacity at 5,000 logs per producer. Webb pays farmers 60 percent of the retail value he gets for them. "You can start too small in this business," warned Webb, who cautioned farmers that the same production supplies are necessary for 50 logs or 1,000. Webb said farmers can expect to harvest one-third of a pound of mushrooms per log per harvest with three harvests per year with a \$4,800 profit per thousand logs to producers who

contract with him.

Webb also warns growers against using just any kind of log to grow on since some logs such as locust have enzymes that kill the spores that develop into mushrooms. Webb buys 4- to 6-inch diameter pre-cut oak logs from the local timber industry for \$1 each, then drills and inoculates them with mushroom spores before soaking and stacking them. "It takes a year from inoculation before the mycelium infects the logs, then you can soak the logs and pick the mushrooms four days later when conditions are right. After the initial waiting

period the mushrooms can be harvested three times a year for up to four years—the life of the log," said Webb.

Webb also said he's willing to purchase freshly harvested Morel and Chantrel mushrooms that grow wild throughout much of Appalachia for \$12 per pound.

If you are interested in purchasing mushrooms from Sheltowee Farm or interested in becoming a grower, visit its Web site at www.sheltoweefarm.com or call Webb at (859) 219-3400.

—**Bill Holleran**

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